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ABSTRACT

Arguing that following some simple concepts can drastically reduce the rate of illiteracy, this booklet maintains that the extent of the literacy problem is teacher-induced and can be reversed by the systematic teaching of the phonics of the English language. The booklet argues that students in grades 1-3 are just beginning to learn how to read and that teachers in grades 4 and up should be taught that they must recognize specific reading problems and how to teach the reading of and the spelling and the meaning/s of those words that contain these special problems. The booklet includes a test that anyone can use to validate "Professor AVKO's" arguments--mark the easier word to read, spell, teach, and learn among 10 pairs of words. The booklet then discusses simple words (with a base of one syllable) and "power" words (with a base of more than one syllable). The booklet argues that the phonic components of the "harder" words of each pair in the test are rarely taught in the first three grades but are essential to understanding the "power" words. A control version of the test is included in the booklet. Contains 10 references. (RS)

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ED 371 333

Is Professor AVKO right?

A Challenge to Educators and Educational Researchers at Every Level

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by

Don McCabe

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Foreword

When this paper was first written, twenty-five copies of it were sent to some of the leading educators in the United States. With it was a simple request for a response. To respond required only checking one of four boxes, writing a few appropriate comments, then putting it inside a stamped self-addressed envelope that we provided.

A month later we had not received a single response from any of these top people in the field of reading.

A second set was sent out to the same people, this time with a checklist that they could simply mark and return in another stamped self-addressed envelope. Among the choices was: "Somehow it got lost. Please send me another copy." One educator did that. Another was sent to him that same day his reply came. Not another answer came from him or anyone else. Now, four months have gone by.

We invite everybody to try the experiment that is in this challenge. We invite you to see for yourself if Professor AVKO is right. If you agree, just maybe, you might help us spread the word that the current rate of illiteracy in the United States does not have to continue. If we follow AVKO's simple concepts we can drastically reduce the rate of illiteracy.

And by the way, the **greatest** of all **discoveries** have been **simple**. Fire. The wheel. The alphabet. The printing press. Asepsis (Doctors, wash your hands!). The last simple medical discovery has saved more lives than any other medical discovery. But when Dr. Semmelweiss who made the simple discovery, tried to convince his colleagues in the medical profession that the death rate from puerperal fever did not have to be 13.10%, his ideas and his statistics were not accepted. To do so, the medical profession would have had to admit that they were needlessly killing women because they were too lazy to wash their hands. It was much easier to lock Semmelweiss up in an insane asylum than to shut him up. And so they did.

I suspect that Professor AVKO's ideas are much like those of Semmelweiss. They are so simple, so filled with common sense, that educators do not want to accept them because to do so, they would have to admit that they have allowed millions of people to remain illiterates, because they didn't bother to teach them what they needed to know in order to learn to read: the phonics of the English language.

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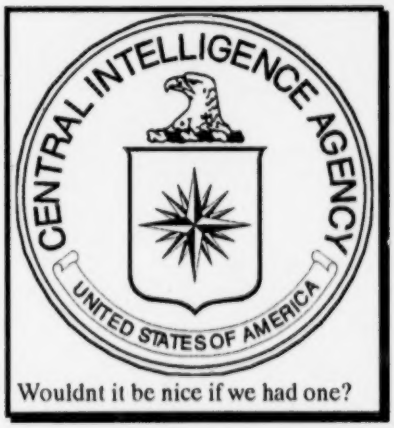
Is Professor AVKO right?



Wouldnt it be nice if we had one?

For years, Professor AVKO has maintained that the extent of our nation's literacy problem is iatrogenic. That is, teacher-induced. He claims the underlying cause of illiteracy or dyslexia is a failure of our educational system to teach. His explanation is that it is too easy for educators to shift the blame to parents, economic factors, racial factors, socio-economic factors, cultural factors, underpaid and/or undereducated teachers, lack of discipline, or whatever (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, et.al, 1985). Psychologists have long maintained that projection is common to all of us, educators included. We tend to blame others for our own faults. The **teachers of teachers** are especially prone to passing the buck. These college instructors blame the elementary teachers. They claim that elementary teachers don't practice what they teach them in the college education classes (Kerr, D.H., 1983). They will not admit, however, that there is one area, a crucial area, of educational curriculum that is **not being taught in any American university** at the present time! It is this area that this challenge is all about.

Professor AVKO maintains that no matter how much money is thrown at education (witness the *60 Minutes* segment on the Kansas City, Missouri school system), no matter how many computers are purchased for schools or for students, no matter how highly paid our teachers become, no matter how small our classrooms become, we will not greatly reduce the number of functional illiterates in our society. He accepts the definition of functional illiteracy as identified as Level 2 in the most comprehensive literacy survey conducted to date, *Adult Literacy in America.* This book is the result of the National Adult Literacy Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics under authorization of the U.S. Department of Education (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, Kolstad, 1993).,

Headstart is a start, but only a start. No matter what reading system is used , no matter how small the classes, no matter how well paid and well educated the teachers, no matter how many computers are in the classroom, no matter how slick and glossy the books being used in those first three grades, **a large segment will start slipping further and further behind as they progress through the grades.** No matter if we finally throw out the drug dealers, take back our neighborhoods and our neighborhood schools, and restore old-fashioned discipline, the results will essentially be the same. **Unacceptable.**

Why doesn't the system work? Because there is a serious flaw in the underlying assumption held by those who have decision making ability regarding curriculum, whether in the colleges of education or in the public school systems.

The faulty assumption is:

- **In grades 1-3 students learn to read.**
- **In grades 4 up students read to learn.**

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Simple Words have a base of one syllable, e.g.:
stand
understand
misunderstand
misunderstanding
misunderstandings

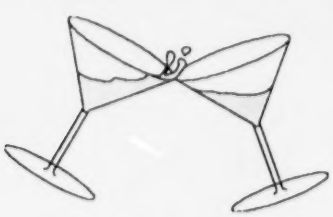
What really happens is that in grades 1-3 students are just beginning to learn how to read. They are only being *exposed* to words that, for the most part, follow what we call simple spelling patterns (McCabe, 1992). These words may contain many letters. For example, the word *misunderstandings* contains 17 letters and five syllables. Yet, it has a *base* of only *one* syllable, *stand*. All of the word parts can be found in other words used in the curriculum of grades 1-3. *Mis-* is a common prefix. *Under* is both a common word and a common prefix. And *-ing* is a common suffix as well as the *-s*. You can take that word *misunderstandings* and match it with any word in column B on page 6 and you will find that nearly everyone who can read at all will be able to read that word *misunderstandings*, but may not be able to read a much shorter word such as *precious* in column B. Whole word advocates have a difficult time explaining that phenomenon. Their typical response for a "big" word like *elephant* being easier is that it is a concrete noun and has a high frequency of occurrence. However, the word *misunderstandings* does not ever occur in books, charts, magazines, or even on bulletin boards or chalkboards in grades 1-3. The word *precious* by all concepts normally associated with readability should be easier to learn to read and to spell than the word misunderstandings. But it isn't, obviously.

Tentative conclusions:

Students in grades 1-3 learn little story telling words such as: *See Spot, Dick, and Jane come running and hopping down the bunny trail to our house.* But they have ***not*** learned to read well enough to **read to learn**. Students from the fourth grade up are expected to correctly apply what they have learned from learning little story telling words to reading sentences containing curriculum generated words that have patterns in them that do not occur in the first three grades. In the next sentence a sampling of these subject matter related words are italicized.

> For *democracy* to *function* in a *multi-cultural society*, it's absolutely *crucial* that *concepts* such as *justice* and *social consciousness* are taught.

Not only are these words long but these words contain abstract concepts that need to be taught. And, each one of them contain at least one phonic element **not taught** and rarely encountered in early children's story telling literature.Teachers in grades four on up should be taught that they must recognize specific reading problems and how to teach the reading of and the spelling of and the meaning/s of those words that contain these special patterns.



But don't blame the teachers. Even if they wanted to, there is **not a single course** in the phonics and the **patterns of English spelling** taught in any major university within their schools of education! Surfing and wine-tasting, maybe. Phonics, no!

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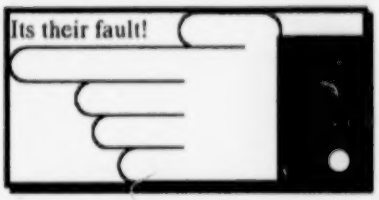

Teachers in grades four through college must not be allowed to continue to blame those teachers in the first three grades for not doing a good enough job teaching the youngsters to read. **Learning-to-read is an ongoing dynamic process**. It's not static. Although a fourth grade teacher would never expect a fourth grade student to be able to handle a college text, they do expect a fourth grade student to handle a fourth grade text with only third grade reading ability!

On the next pages is a test that anyone can use to validate Professor AVKO's arguments. Most researchers design a test, administer it, and report the results and make their conclusions based on correlations that show statistical significance as opposed to practical significance. The fault many critics find with educational studies is that replication is difficult and often inconclusive when attempted (Rowntree, 1981).

Professor AVKO has the unmitigated audacity to challenge the educational system to come up with results that don't almost perfectly match his.

The Survey Test Given to Over 1,000 adults (Mostly teachers). 95.3% had **perfect** scores!

Mark the **easier** word to read, spell, teach, learn, (your choice) with a check mark.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
__ painter	__precious	__chateaus	__booklet	__mechanical
__ partial	__praying	__churches	__boutique	__meaningful
6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
__unions	__mistaken	__petite	__coasting	__spending
__unlikely	__missions	__peeling	__confusion	__specials

Skeptics are encouraged to substitute words for those chosen by Professor AVKO. All he asks is that in any computer generated list of words chosen at random:

- The same initial consonant blends or digraphs are used.
- That the total number of letters in the easier words is exactly the same as the total number of letters in the harder words. (Not necessarily in each pair!)

That in each pair of words one contains only patterns commonly encountered in grades 1-3 (the easier) and the other contains at least one pattern rarely encountered in those crucial first three grades. For example, in the pair *meaningful* and *mechanic*., *meaningful* has 100% simple commonly encountered parts, i.e., /m/ ea /n/ ing /ful/. However the word *mechanic* has two patterns rarely encountered. First the ***ch*** in me***ch***anic is not pronounced /ch/ as in ***ch***op, ***ch***icken, and ***ch***ur***ch***. Rather, it is pronounced ***/k/*** as in ***ch***aos, e***ch***o, anar***ch***y, and ***Ch***ristian. The ***/ik/*** sound in words whose base is one syllable is always ***-ick*** as in ch***ick***en, st***ick***er, tr***ick***s, and p***ick***ing. But in mechan***ic***, it's simply ***-ic*** which occurs only in words whose base is more than one syllable such as man***ic***, organ***ic***, ocean***ic***, pacif***ic***, etc. These words occur in the curriculum ***after*** the third grade.

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Do you know where you can find a complete listing of all these power patterns found in "big" words not taught in the first three grades? Answer: they can be found in *The Patterns of English Spelling* (McCabe, 1992). You should be able to find a copy of it in your local library, but you won't. In fact, 99.9% of all colleges and university libraries do not have a copy of this book. The U.S. Department of Education does NOT have a copy of this book! No State Department of Education has a copy of this book! At present only a few teachers, usually teachers of dyslexics and learning disabled possess a copy of this book. The Center for the Study of Reading does not have a copy of this book. Nor does the Institute for Research on Teaching! But the Orton Dyslexia Society, The Disabled Reader Group of the International Reading Association and the Reading Reform Foundation do!

Column A Simple Words Base of One Syllable (Easier)				Column B Power Words Base of More Than One Syllable			
	Number of letters	Number of syllables	Level of Difficulty[1]		Number of letters	Number of syllables	Level of Difficulty
painter	7	2	5.45	partial	7	2	17.65
praying	7	2	3.50E	precious	8	2	14.90
churches	8	2	8.40	chateaus	8	2	19.00E
booklet	7	2	3.70	boutique	8	2	19.00E
meaningful	10	3	8.20E	mechanical	10	4	16.60
mistaken	8	3	7.40	missions	8	2	10.50E
painter	7	2	5.45	partial	7	2	17.65
unlikely	8	3	7.50E	unions	6	2	10.00E
peeling	7	2	7.00E	petite	6	2	17.00E
Averages	7.8	2.3	6.82	Averages	7.8	2.3	14.75

Note the words opposite each other have the same beginning letters, e.g., pa- in painter and pa- in partial. In column B two words are one letter longer than their corresponding words in column A. In Column A two words are one letter longer than their corresponding words in column B.

The only significant difference between the words in column A and column B is that the words in column B contain patterns that are not taught in the first three grades or that are not generally learned through exposure no matter what system of teaching reading is employed. That is why the words in column B are more difficult.

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[1] Difficulty Level is based on a scale of 1.00 (Easiest) to 21.00 (Hardest). The statistics are mathematical extrapolations (Webb, McCabe) of the statistics found in *The New Iowa Spelling Scale* (Greene, Loomer, 1977). Those with an E following are estimates based upon similar words.

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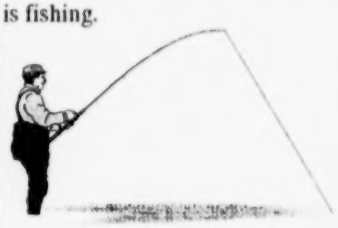
George Bernard Shaw was wrong.
Fish is spelled fici not ghoti
gh = /f/ asin enough.
o = /I/ in women.
ti=/sh/ as in nation. But fish is fici in words whose base has more than one syllable.

offishul	official
benafishul	beneficial
effishunt	efficient
suffishunt	sufficient

A fisherman is fishing.



Yet, the patterns that make the words in column B more difficult are highly regular. For example, the pattern ***ci-*** is almost always pronounced /sh/ as in *ra**ci**al, spe**ci**al, so**ci**al, spa**ci**ous, suspi**ci**ous*, etc. Good readers learn to respond to them somehow. Dyslexics have a miserable time with them. Good readers who are horrible spellers will often substitute ***sh*** for the ***ci*** pattern and spell the words *ra**sh**ul, spe**sh**ul, so**sh**ul* and *spa**sh**us*.

If Professor AVKO's theories are wrong, then it follows logically that people who can read will half the time pick a column B word as the easier word. Certainly, total non-readers (such as those whose native written language is not a Roman alphabetic language)will average 50% when quizzed. But readers, whether dyslexic or not, will invariably pick the word in Column B as the more difficult word. And they don't know why. All they know is that somehow the word *precious* is a tougher word than *churches* even though *precious* occurs more frequently in print than the word *churches* (Excluding religious writings, naturally).

Prediction: The obvious is true: Words whose phonic components are either systematically taught in the first three grades or whose phonic components are in words commonly presented for learning in the first three grades will be chosen as the easier word. Words whose phonic components are not taught and rarely, if ever, occur in words commonly presented for learning in the first three grades will inevitably be chosen as the more difficult.

Significance: If the vast majority of students are to become good readers and not just the "elite" who can read the word elite, educators should find a way to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to learn the words that contain the phonic components that are neither taught systematically nor occur in words presented for learning in the first three grades.

Note: The consensus of the reading experts selected by the NIE for its report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, was that the teaching of simple phonics should be completed by the end of grade 2 (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, et.al., 1985)! From there on in, instruction in phonics is not indicated! Professor AVKO disagrees. He does agree that idealistically the teaching of "simple" phonics should be completed by the end of grade two. Professor AVKO wouldn't mind if the completion of the teaching of "simple" phonics were to be completed by the end of grade three. However, AVKO contends that mastery of "simple" phonics is not enough for the majority of learners. The phonics of words whose base has more than one syllable should be taught systematically starting at least as early as grade four.

Tests: On page 5 is a simple pencil and paper test that can be administered to as many individuals at the same time as a researcher desires. Please notice that there is a control version of that test. If a researcher wants to verify that the number of letters and specific letters has nothing to do with the difficulty, but rather the patterns, on page 8 is the same test only with the patterns totally eliminated. The letters are the same. However, the consonants in each word are put first

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and deliberately placed in such a fashion that pronunciation cannot take place. The vowels are placed at the end of the word. Again, if there are multiple vowels, care was taken to order them in such a way as to make any reasonable pronunciation difficult. In our first version we supplied cards to enable different methods of giving the test individually. Now, they are available only upon request.

The Control Survey Test given to over 100 adults (Mostly teachers). Nobody had a perfect score!

Mark the easier word to read, spell, teach, learn, (your choice) with a check mark.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
__ pnrtaie	__pcrseiuo	__hctsaaue	__bkltooe	__mhcnleaia
__ ptrlaai	__pgyrnai	__hrhccsue	__btqouiue	__mlnngfeaiu
6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
__nnsuuio	__mstkniae	__pttiee	__cstngoai	__sgpndnei
__nlykluie	__msssniio	__plngeei	__cnfsnouio	__lsspceia

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